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INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION

Letter dated 12 November 1993 from the Deputy Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit to you herewith the text of the concluding statements of the International Decade for Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) Chiba International Conference, held in Japan from 27 to 30 November 1992, and of the IDNDR Aichi Nagoya International Conference, held in Japan from 1 to 4 November 1993 (see annexes).

I should be grateful if the text of the present letter and its annexes could be circulated as an official document of the General Assembly under agenda item 98.

(Signed) Shunji MARUYAMA
Deputy Permanent Representative

Annex I

CONCLUDING STATEMENT OF THE IDNDR CHIBA
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The IDNDR Chiba International Conference was held in Chiba from 27 to 30 November 1992, the third year of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. The theme was "Towards new frontiers against natural disasters". A total of 911 persons concerned with disaster management participated, including government officials, researchers and representatives of non-governmental organizations. They came from 37 countries and five international organizations.

The Conference focused on natural disasters such as typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones. It aimed for an exchange of information and opinions on experiences of such disasters, on countermeasures to be used against them between nations and cities faced with such disasters, and on the latest approaches to disaster management. A wide range of new topics in disaster reduction was discussed at the Conference, including the latest weather-forecasting techniques, early warning systems and the dissemination of disaster information utilizing mass media, the application of new technologies for disaster reduction, preparedness and recovery in business and industry, and the relationship between disaster mitigation and the environment.

Although disaster reduction efforts are continuing around the world, many persons still fall victim to natural disasters, and there is a tendency for social and economic damage due to such disasters to escalate. The effects of natural disasters are felt particularly in developing countries, where the social and economic damage cannot fail to have an impact on the development of the country as a whole. In order to reduce the damage caused by disasters even a little, it is important to store and share information and experiences gained from previous disasters, and put that information to good use in future disaster management. Further, since environmental degradation due to unreasonable development is one cause of natural disasters, it is important to increase awareness of the need for "disaster reduction for sustainable development".

Regarding meteorological observation and analysis and the issuing and dissemination of warnings, it is important to improve the accuracy of forecasting, particularly that of tropical cyclones and localized rainstorms, and adjust the quantity of information and the forms of presentation used in issuing warnings to the regions concerned. It is also important to establish better means of communication which take account of the level of knowledge and the psychology of the end recipients of the information.

In order to apply new technologies to disaster reduction, since the disasters to be dealt with are of uncertain magnitude and type, we need to construct intelligent systems with greater adaptability than hitherto, systems which are also strong enough to withstand disasters. For example, the development of practical disaster-preventing robots will require comprehensive development over a long period of time. Remote-sensing was recognized as an extremely powerful tool for the monitoring, management and forecasting of disasters. In particular, a combination of global positioning systems (GPS) and

geographic information systems (GIS) would be effective in risk assessment and the mitigation of disasters and would be helpful for constructing a model of an early warning system.

In present-day society, it is necessary to recognize the role to be played by corporations as well as by Governments and citizens. For the improvement of social stability, the disaster management activities of corporations are extremely important. Three roles should be given to corporations:

(a) Ensuring the safety of employees and communicating with their families as a responsibility of employers;

(b) Rapid recommencement of business activities, to ensure corporate profitability and the maintenance of social functions;

(c) Contribution to local communities.

At present, disaster management measures by corporations are not necessarily adequate.

A problem facing developed and developing countries alike is the environmental background to natural disasters. Changes in the types of land use, the spread of urbanization, and excessive deforestation bring changes to regional environments, increasing vulnerability to natural disasters, and inviting changes in the type and scale of the disasters experienced. Furthermore, at present these effects are felt first of all by poor people in developing countries.

The tasks to be assumed by each country and the tasks requiring international cooperation were discussed at the Conference, based on a recognition of the problems outlined above. The major tasks discussed were the following:

1. To establish international and interdisciplinary research networks and databases for disaster management.

2. In addition to expanding meteorological forecasting networks and improving forecasting technology, to try to develop and apply basic scientific techniques to improving forecasting accuracy.

3. To establish dissemination systems for disaster information in the areas where they are not yet installed.

4. To recognize the importance of the mass media in disseminating disaster warnings, and to establish suitable means of disseminating warnings.

5. To make efforts to increase awareness and knowledge of disaster preparedness, giving consideration to the uncertainties involved and the different needs of the various regions, in order for the general public to make effective use of disaster warnings.

6. To attempt an international comparative study of the factors, including geographical, economic, cultural and institutional differences, affecting the promotion of corporate disaster management.

7. To continue a study on the contributions to be made by international corporations to developing countries based on the internationalization of the economy and the transfer of disaster reduction technology.

8. To recognize the need for an assessment of the effects of development on the environment and the increases in the scale of natural disasters which it may involve.

9. To make scientific and quantitative evaluations, with international cooperation, of the relationship between disaster mitigation and environmental problems, and to recognize the relationship as a part of disaster science.

10. To promote environmental and disaster preparedness education and to increase awareness of disaster preparedness for residents of regions inherently at risk.

Proposals were also made at the Conference for specific activities to be undertaken under the IDNDR framework. These were as follows:

1. To reinforce the regional specialized meteorological centres of the WMO in order to improve forecasting and warnings of tropical cyclones.

2. To encourage relevant organizations, governmental organizations and the industrial sector to set up a working group composed of specialists in the fields of robotics and disaster reduction for the purpose of exchanging information and opinions on the present situation and future goals with regard to research and development of disaster-preventing robots. (Some participants in the Conference confirmed their intention to set up such a working group and continue discussion.)

3. To publish, in book and CD-ROM digital formats, maps on disaster management and examples of its application, using remote-sensing and GIS, in cooperation with disaster specialists and remote-sensing scientists.

4. To hold seminars and workshops on remote-sensing and GIS for the monitoring and management of natural disasters in order to promote international cooperation among disaster specialists and remote-sensing scientists.

5. To request the industrial sector to set up institutional frameworks, including self-imposed inspection by enterprise associations, of corporate disaster management systems, and to establish voluntary organizations which promote the sharing of information and cooperative activities related to corporate disaster management.

In addition, some examples of where specific activities had already begun were reported. For example, a group composed of technicians and researchers concerned with seismic disasters has organized the World Seismic Safety Activity Initiative, with the aim of preventing and reducing world earthquake damage. A technology is being developed for low-cost and disaster-resistant housing.

Another group has begun to set up an international disaster management research body.

We are nearly at the end of the third year of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. However, the goal of reducing loss of human life and property damage has not been adequately met. In spite of the fact that numerous meetings have been held, during and after the preparatory period, and enormous international projects have been proposed, there are very few cases of concrete action. If the situation persists, it is doubtful whether much will be achieved during the remaining seven years, to the year 2000. This is due to the fact that awareness of the IDNDR differs from region to region and from organization to organization, and that different organizations are responding in different ways. The greatest problem of all remains that of financial backing for the various proposals.

In order to improve the situation, it is necessary to broaden the common base of awareness among individuals, organizations, countries and international organizations. The World Conference to be held in 1994, the mid-term year of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, should provide a stimulus in that regard. At that conference, through a review of the first five years of the International Decade and a clarification of the goals for the last five years, based on the review, a strategy must be adopted for concentrating global activities in pursuit of the aims of the Decade. The results of the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, to be held in Yokohama in May 1994, will determine the success or failure of IDNDR.

We, the participants in the 1992 Conference, holding the views mentioned above, submit the concrete proposals outlined above to the relevant organizations and hope that they and the activities already under way will be realized. We also hope that similar proposals and activities will take place world wide, that they will be reported at the 1994 World Conference, and that they will prove a stimulus to additional energetic activities.

Annex II

CONCLUDING STATEMENT OF THE IDNDR AICHI/NAGOYA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The IDNDR Aichi/Nagoya International Conference was held in the city of Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, from 1 to 4 November 1993, the fourth year of the International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction, with the theme of "Disaster management in metropolitan areas for the twenty-first century". A total of 1,100 experts involved in the field of disaster prevention, including administrators, researchers and representatives of non-governmental organizations, participated. They came from 46 countries and nine international organizations.

Disasters occurring in metropolitan areas can have a grave impact on other domestic and international communities and their economies as well as urban residents. Moreover, metropolitan areas have become increasingly vulnerable to disasters as a result of such developments as the overconcentration of population and economic infrastructure in urban areas, the transformation in urban lifestyles and lack of citizen awareness. It should be recognized that disaster prevention in urban areas is one of the most important factors contributing to sustainable development in developing countries, where urbanization is rapidly advancing.

In confronting these realities, the Conference participants presented reports and exchanged views on the following agenda items: disaster risks and the impact of damage in metropolitan areas; disaster countermeasures in urban planning; disaster countermeasures for lifeline facilities, schools and hospitals; the response of local governments and information strategies; citizen participation in volunteer activities; advanced disaster research and prevention; and other topics.

It was recognized that natural disasters now lead to "complex emergencies" in which political, social and economic turmoil, population growth, poverty, environmental degradation and other factors aggravate the effects of the disasters, resulting in compounded damage. In developing countries in particular, population and capital inflows rapidly concentrate in urban areas, and thus the risks of a "complex emergency" there have become increasingly serious.

It was also recognized that natural disasters can destroy economic infrastructures and that ethnic, cultural and economic diversity should be considered when extending humanitarian aid to disaster victims. Furthermore, it was pointed out that, in addition to the need for relief measures for disaster-stricken areas, there exists a need to prepare for disasters by improving methods of prediction, forecasting, and prior-assessment of hazards with the latest scientific technologies.

On the basis of the reports presented and discussions held at the Conference, the following specific suggestions were made to central and local governments, researchers and other authorities:

1. To facilitate risk assessment in urban areas where population, capital and resources are concentrated, convenient methods which meet the current needs and capabilities of each region and country should be developed and disseminated.

2. Planners of development projects must take into account "disaster hazards" when formulating and implementing their plans. To raise the awareness of residents, politicians and others, accurate data should be provided through effective presentation methods. For example, the cost of disaster damage should be estimated, and methods of visual data analysis should be developed and widely used.

3. The minimum level of functioning of lifeline systems to be maintained during an emergency and their positions in the disaster prevention plans should be clarified, taking into account the characteristics of the country or region. It is necessary to strengthen the strategic structures of lifeline systems.

4. To ensure the safety of hospitals, schools and other important public facilities and to maintain their functioning as bases in an emergency, effective regulations on building design should be established and disseminated. Citizens and the administrators of such facilities should be made aware, through education, of the importance of ensuring the security of critical facilities.

5. It is important to disseminate information and maintain a communications system during an emergency. The accuracy of information monitoring systems concerning meteorology, river levels, volcanos and other phenomena should be improved, and the swift transmission of such information to citizens should be encouraged.

6. Voluntary disaster prevention activities by private volunteers are important and should be encouraged and efficiently utilized. The conditions surrounding these activities should be improved. The necessary staff should be assembled and trained regularly in communication, first-aid and other specialized fields. Their priorities should be clarified in the disaster prevention plan. Affiliations with public organizations should be strengthened.

7. Global networks and global projects related to disaster monitoring, prediction and prevention technologies should be established, with an emphasis on international cooperation.

8. Adequate technologies for predicting disasters should be developed. They should reflect the properties of natural phenomena as well as the geographical and societal features of the regions and cities in which they will be applied.

The International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction began in 1990. In order to review previous activities and formulate future action programmes, the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction is to be held in Yokohama from 23 to 27 May 1994. The Conference is highly significant, since it will accelerate the progress of future IDNDR activities.

The participants of the IDNDR Aichi/Nagoya International Conference set the following goals to ensure the success of the World Conference:

(a) To assist donor countries and international organizations in disaster prevention, in light of the insufficient involvement of developing countries in disaster-prevention activities;

(b) To promote IDNDR international demonstration projects and other disaster-prevention projects which will be completed during the IDNDR and which are expected to attain significant success;

(c) To establish a network comprising national Governments, international organizations, universities and other establishments for the exchange of information and data for use in the assessment and planning of disaster reduction. A centre serving as the core of such a network should be set up;

(d) Although emergency aid should be targeted at supporting self-help efforts, a system should be formulated that responds swiftly to a disaster emergency with humanitarian assistance.

We expect that the above appeals will be taken up by the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction and that the Conference will achieve much progress.

It is impossible to prevent natural hazards from occurring; however, it is possible to minimize their damage through the application of wisdom and effort.

We hope that all countries, local governments, researchers, international organizations and others concerned will make further efforts to cooperate in the activities of IDNDR, with the aim of solving the problems and realizing the proposals addressed at the Conference. To achieve success, each of us must fully recognize the importance of disaster prevention.

We hope that disaster countermeasures for metropolitan areas will be swiftly and efficiently developed, with the Conference as a stepping stone, and that the damage caused by natural disasters will be steadily, if not totally, alleviated.